File 343
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NARRATIVE DISCOURSE DISCOVERY PROCEDURES

In approaching discourse analysis, the analyst needs to assume that all discourse has a structure of some kind however sophisticated or simple that may be. That is, texts are not just thrown together without thought of some kind of order. Along with this is the assumption that the discourse order of one language will differ from the order or syntax of another language so that we cannot make one order work for all. It is the analyst's work to discover this order for his language, and to describe it.

With this in mind then, the following procedures for analysis may prove helpful. (We assume that you have translated the text in either a word by word or morpheme by morpheme form with free translation).

1) Look at the text you are working on and try to roughly identify major sections. That is, we assume that each text will have a way to begin, and a way to end. This potentially gives us two major parts of a discourse--beginning and ending or setting and conclusion. (A general rule in identifying boundaries of sections of your texts is that they tend to occur where you find CHANGES. For example, changes in actors, events, time setting, location etc.). If you can identify these parts, describe what markers signal their beginning and ending.

If you have been able to do this, you are left with what comes between these two sections. You might call this the "body" of the text. These three parts--setting, body, ending--may be the major sections of your discourse that you need to identify. As best you can describe the signals, morphemes, verb tenses or other that are used to mark these three sections.

2) Identify the dramatis personnae or cast of your narrative. Who are the major and minor actors? Note how actors are introduced into the narrative and how they are referred to subsequently.

3) Count the number of references to each of the actors in your narrative both direct, pronominal and verbal references. That is, "Imran" "he" "him" "his" and "walking" may all make direct or indirect references to Imran himself. You would expect a higher number of references to major versus minor actors.

4) Identify the background props--place, time, conditions etc. that serve to orient the hearer to the narrative.

5) How is prominence indicated in your narrative? You may assume that sheer number of references may indicate prominence. In a lexical sense, a theme may be made prominent by constant reference either directly or by use of synonyms--beautiful, breath-taking, dazzling, attention grabbing.

6) Can you identify a peak in the narrative to which the action or tension builds

and is finally resolved?

7) Look at the tense-aspects of the verb used in the narrative. Describe those used in the different parts of the narrative and note how they compare. That is, one would expect a different kind of tense-aspect to be dominant in the setting than in the body of the narrative. Make a guess at which kind seems to dominate each part.

8) In narrative discourse some kind of time line is assumed. Can you trace the verbs or other signals that move this time line along from start to finish?

9) Are there places that depart from this time line to "flash back" to some previous time in order to fill in important information to the understanding of the narrative? How is this done and what tenses are used to indicate these?

10) Are there words in your text which do not seem to have any other function than to signal discourse level meaning? For example, all the words of the phrase, "the beautiful horse" refer to phrase-level analysis (that is, "the horse" "beautiful horse" all refer to the head of the phrase 'horse'), but a word like, "meanwhile" seems to refer more to a higher level even a discourse level kind of meaning. If you have these, note them.

11) To give a visual picture of your text, make a chart of it following the instructions for making a "Thurman Chart" in the attached chapter from the book, "The Thread of Discourse" by Joseph Grimes.

12) Do this same procedure for two or more of your recorded narrative texts.

13) Finally, taking the information gained above, describe as best you can in a written account, the features that characterize narrative discourse in your language. Include such sections as overall structure i.e., constituent parts, time line, pronominal reference, prominence, discourse-level markers, flash backs, peak, characteristic verb tense-aspects and so on.

Other Reading:

Bearth, Thomas. 1978. Outline of Preliminary Procedures for Discovering Discourse Structure. Notes on Linguistics. No. 6 (April 1978).

Grimes, Joseph E. 1975. The Thread of Discourse. Mouton: New York.

Longacre, Robert E. 1974. "Narrative Versus Other Discourse Genre," in Brend, Advances in Tagmemics, pp. 357-376. North-Holland Publishing Co.: New York.
Longacre, Robert E. 1983. The Grammar of Discourse. Plenum Press: New York.